Research / Albina Retyunskikh

Study Shows Monetary Impact of Faith

IS IT possible to put a price on faith? The Halo Canada Project — which has been tackling this question for the past five years, with research in over 80 congregations around the country — released a study in May showing that faith communities contribute $15.5 billion to the national economy each year.

"When we explain that for every dollar congregations spend, the wider community gets back $3.85, that's something that somebody in the neighbourhood can understand and see that it's having tangible value," says Mike Wood Daly, director of the project.

The dollar amount includes ways churches give directly to their communities, such as offering parking; acting like recreational centres, daycares or schools; building affordable housing; helping new immigrants and refugees settle; and even contributing to storm management through their green spaces.

Halo Canada also worked on a report with EDGE, the United Church's network for ministry development. Released in February, the report shows that the United Church alone contributes $1.6 billion annually to the economy.

EDGE executive director Rob Dalgleish says that being able to quantify this impact is crucial for congregations looking to raise money from local stakeholders, who want to know how their donations will be put to good use.

"Inherently, people can see the good that's happening within their own community of faith," adds Carla Leon, new initiatives manager at EDGE. "They can feel the social and spiritual impact they're making in the neighbourhood. But to see it concretely as a number, I think it's really validating."

Question Box / Christopher White

Not in the Job Description

Q Since COVID-19, my job as a minister has changed dramatically, but my formal job description hasn't. My church's ministry and personnel committee wants to wait and see if we get back to normal in 2021 before making any permanent changes, but I'm worried about being evaluated against the old expectations. How do I move this forward?

A THERE IS NO QUESTION that the jobs of clergy are dramatically different today than they were in March, and that job descriptions have not evolved to reflect that. The reality is that even if there is a vaccine in 2021, the landscape of the church has changed forever. We are becoming creators of online content as a central part of our ministry, in ways that none of us could have ever imagined. This, in my view, is a national issue that the Office of Vocation will need to be involved in, along with regional personnel ministers.

To start, document all that you have done differently since March and itemize the ways your job has changed. You could meet with ministry colleagues to craft new job descriptions that reflect the work you are all actually doing. Then, sit down with your ministry and personnel committee, and compare what you are doing now with the pre-existing job description. This is also an opportunity to share with them why you believe these changes to be permanent and how your work will continue to evolve over the next 12 months.

We are in a state of flux right now, and none of us knows exactly what the "new normal" will look like. But we need to be evaluated on what we are actually doing, not what we did in the past.

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Thinking Ahead

Talk about being prepared! In this prescient story from 2006, we interviewed Bev Oag about her work on the United Church's pandemic plan. The big thing, Oag told writer Mike Milne, "is to get people talking about it, thinking about it and looking at their own situation." Churches should consider, she said, how to clean, how to be in community and how to comfort each other if things get rough. —ELENA GRITZAN



PHOTOGRAPH BY KEN KERR